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ABSTRACT

The optional functioning of the family unit is dependent on the health and happiness of each family member. When the wife is professionally trained and yet feels "trapped" by the presence of children in the home with no available transportation, baby-sitting, or part-time employment options, the family unit can suffer or the wife suffers. The counselor must be sensitive to the woman's need for fulfillment within and outside the home. The role of the counselor is to help the wife: (1) deal with her "trapped" feelings and express them to significant others: (2) plan and initiate ways to increase fulfillment inside and outside the home: (3) assess her career opportunities; and (4) develop strategies for personal growth. If the counselor can successfully restore the wife to feelings of fulfillment, each family member will benefit in terms of mental health. (Author)

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COUNSELING THE "TRAPPED" HOUSEWIFE

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COUNSELING THE "TRAPPED" HOUSEWIFE

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ABSTRACT

The optimal functioning of the family unit is dependent on the health and happiness of each person in the family. When the wife is professionally trained and yet feels "trapped" by the presence of children in the home with no transportation, baby-sitting, or part-time employment options, the family unit can suffer as the wife suffers. The counselor must be sensitive to the woman's need for fulfillment both within and outside the home. Not only must the counselor encourage the wife to deal with feelings of being "trapped", but also she must be helped to express her feelings toward those people (husband, children, and potential employers) who may be seen as responsible for the entrapment. The counselor must help the wife plan and act on ways to increase fulfillment in the house and outside. If the counselor can successfully restore the wife to feelings of fulfillment, each person within the family will benefit in terms of mental health. This paper will describe (1) some characteristics exhibited by housewives who feel "trapped" by the domestic responsibilities and frustrated in their efforts to gain fulfillment, (2) some strategies for counseling the "trapped" housewife and her family, and (3) some options and resources in the community through which the wife can seek support and fulfillment.

INTRODUCTION

The work and ideas described in this paper have evolved out of several years of experience as a counselor educator, community mental health counselor, and attentive neighbor. In the last four years as solely a counselor educator, I have been impressed by the "trapped" feelings that have either forced students into our program or resulted after the students had earned their master's from us. I have worked with a number of these women, and my hope is to integrate these experiences with some relevant professional literature. I believe that exposure leads to appreciation, and I hope that I can provide you with an awareness that will enable you to do preventative counseling and career planning with female clients.

CHARACTERISTICS

The concept and appearance of the "trapped" housewife deserve explication. Frieze, et al (1978) state that

> The housewife's job is one which generally comes to a woman because of her legal relationship to her husband, not through her choice of the work itself. Women are expected to perform household tasks on the basis of love and duty (p. 139).

The housewife is a woman who is held to the house because of family responsibilities, the attitude of her spouse, the expectations of his or her parents, her own personal choice, or her lack of employability. She feels "trapped" in the housewife role when she is unable to escape or find relief from the job of housewife.

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There may be circumstances in her socio-economic and geographical situation which may cause feelings of being "trapped". She may be far from family and friends due to her husband being transferred as a part of his career. The absences of former supportive relationships, places to go and people with whom to go, and perhaps the loss of baby-sitting services fosters the feelings of being "trapped". Indeed, Weissman, et al (1973), document that those women who make frequent moves as a result of following their husbands tend to suffer symptoms of depression more frequently than women who can maintain support systems. Combine this situation with economic conditions which may not allow the wife to have a car for her exclusive use; she may, therefore, feel very restricted in terms of mobility. This may, or may not, be added to such other restrictions as lack of day care or baby-sitting resources and no opportunities for meaningful full or part-time employment to yield feelings of non-fulfillment.

"Trapped" housewives may encounter psychological problems and manifest clinical symptoms. This writer has seen women who are depressed and who find the normal tasks of homemaker terribly exhausting. Their energy level is below normal, and this lack of vitality affects their relationships in and out of the home. Weissman, et al (1973), describe the depressed housewives in their study as ". . . characterized by impairment in the performance of housework, boredom, and marital friction (p. 570)." This writer has also counseled women who displayed great amounts of anxiety, for their isolation as a housewife gave them time to worry about every imaginable thing, including the health of each member of the family, the possibility of the husband being injured or killed between home and work, etc. These worries took on an almost immobilizing quality and caused sleeplessness, non-eating, and marital discord. It is possible that the well-read, anxious housewife may fall into the "cancer scare" syndrome and become preoccupied with the threat of herself or family members coming down with cancer.

Manis (1976) describes the concept of "disengagement" as related to becoming a housewife. This concept, or phenomenon, is described as ". . . a process of gradual reduction of activities and associations outside the home after marriage (p. 186)." Manis has worked in a program called Search for Fulfillment (Manis and Mochizuki, 1972) which involved middle-class women who wanted to add meaning to their lives. Manis characterizes the disengaging housewife as coming

> . . . from conservative small towns or suburban communities. These communities were characterized by lack of child and homecare assistance and a lack of employment opportunities. Others experienced frequent residential moves from community to community because of company promotional policies. Their friendships were meager and almost entirely with women in similar circumstances (p. 187).

The preceding statement is consistent with what this author and Weissman, et al, found, and Manis goes on to say that disengaging housewives

> reported that their premarital circle of friends were marriage oriented . . . Since the goal was to get married and live happily ever after, these women usually either planned on employment as a stop-gap activity until the real goal of marriage was achieved or as something to fall back on in case "something happens". For this reason, they gave very little thought to any meaningful selection of a suitable career, resulting in inadequate preparation for a career-type occupation (p. 187).

> . . . married young and had children shortly after marriage. They usually chose dominant, competitive men as husbands. Often, the husbands early in marriage had been deeply involved in progressing in their careers and becoming financially secure (p. 190).

> . . . felt it was more acceptable to their families to limit outside activities to those that would make them better housewives and mothers;

church, cooking, and sewing classes, and home decorating projects. As their children became older, PTA activities were included. Their social activities were limited to kaffeklatsches with neighborhood women of similar ages and interests and to socializing with their husband's friends. An almost total commitment to husband and children is a frequent corollary of the disengagement process after marriage (p. 190).

. . . displayed a poor self-concept of ability with accompanying low aspirations and motivation for achievement. Practically their entire self-identification was that of wife and mother. Their need to be liked by others and their dependence on others for making decisions were often in conflict (p. 190).

All in all, the "trapped" housewife may exhibit a variety of characteristics, and when taken as a cluster, they point to a lack of fulfillment and a crying need to break out of the confinement of the housewife role. I emphasize that not all housewives experience this need for extra-home fulfillment, but for those who do, there is psychic pain and other symptoms of unhappiness which spill over to yield problems for the family.

COUNSELING STRATEGIES

Before beginning a discussion of specific strategies for counseling the "trapped" housewife, it is appropriate to look at some statements about the qualities which counselors of women should have. In a series of statements for Division 17, the Division of Counseling Psychology of the American Psychological Association, several people have provided qualifications and information to be used by counselors of women. Johnson and Scarato (1979) present the following outline of areas of knowledge that these counselors should have:

I. History and sociology of sex-role stereotyping from cultural and personality perspectives.
   Rationale: Counselors should be able to view female behavior in a historical-political perspective. Such a perspective permits counselors to consider the impact of time, place, and social conventions on women's lives, and thus may discourage them from evaluating many female behaviors as universal and immutable (p. 15).

II. Psychophysiology of women and men
   Rationale: Female behavior has often been viewed as a result of physiological forces (e.g., pre-menstrual "bitchiness", post-partum depression, menopausal symptoms, etc.). Also, the double-orgasm myth and the "frigidity" syndrome have been perpetuated, in part, due to ignorance of female sexuality. Knowledge of normal physical and sexual functioning can help counselors to reassure and to educate women (p. 15).

III. Theories of personality development and of sex-role development
   Rationale: Counselors should be aware of the older, more traditional personality theories because they have been and are still such pervasive forces. It is important for counselors to be informed of alternative explorations of female personality and sex-role development as well; these alternatives, while less well-known, may provide more congenial frameworks for counselors in working with women (p. 15).

IV. Life-span development
   Rationale: Changing attitudes toward, and opportunities for, women have affected their development. Counselors must be able to assist women in making difficult choices (e.g., marriage or graduate school, children or no children), and/or help them to combine a number of options without severe stress. Knowledge of the complexity of development from infancy onward provides an essential foundation for helping women in different life stages (p. 16).

V. Special populations

Rationale: Certain women are doubly handicapped through membership in particular ethnic groups, prison and other institutional populations, etc. It is easy to focus on problems resulting from such membership yet their problems are compounded by gender. It is important for counselors to consider this interaction and its effects. Clearly, many more special populations exist than are represented here (p. 16).

VI. Career development

Rationale: The growing number of women in the work force makes it necessary for counselors to consider career development theory and practice as they relate to women. It is crucial that counselors understand social pressures on women to choose the marital role over any other preference. When they can see that marriage is not presented to women as one of two equal options, counselors can better understand women's conflicts about marriage and career. Counselors should understand the factors involved in career choice and should know the data on occupational discrimination (p. 16).

VII. Counseling/psychotherapy

Rationale: Counselor training programs rarely address such factors as the effects of counselor-client gender on interaction, alternatives to counseling for women, feminist perspectives on women's problems, or sex-role stereotyping in the training itself. As a result, practicing counselors may find it difficult to consider these factors as relevant. An open-minded appraisal of such elements may enable the counselor to identify more helpful means of working with female (and male) clients (p. 16).

Of particular importance to working with women who feel "trapped" as housewives are the preceding statements regarding marriage as not being presented as a career option equal to all others and the need for the counselor to be open-minded about the roles women wish to live.

The first step in counseling these women, then, is to provide an environment in which they feel comfortable in opening up to you as a counselor. It may well be that they feel embarrassed or guilty at questioning their role as housewife, and they may fear that you will encourage them to "adjust" to their traditional role. It is likely that they will be feeling all kinds of emotions surrounding their not wanting to totally fulfill society's customary expectation of them as wife and mother, and they may even have heard from friends and relatives that they are "abnormal" for not wanting to be <u>just</u> wife and mother. The counselor needs to be aware of the potential for confusion, conflict and shaken self-esteem, and s/he must show warm caring and concern at the onset of counseling.

Second, the client is likely to be harboring some anger, and this writer has found it appropriate to help her deal with this. The anger is most often directed at persons perceived as responsible for "trapping" the client in the housewife role, and these persons may include the spouse, the children, parents whose values may have misdirected the client in career or marital choice, potential employers who will not honor her part-time commitment desires, and the client herself. The expression of anger is likely to have been stifled by social convention, and the first task is to help the client experience catharsis.

> "Catharsis" can mean many things; here it refers to the feeling of release of pent-up emotion that clients experience in a session either by talking about their troubles or by crying, laughing, shouting, or otherwise engaging in very active emotional release. The pent-up feeling seems to come mainly from either of two frustrations: the client is having feelings and thoughts which appear to be enormous, odd, scary, terrible, and is feeling cut off from other humans because of them; or the action which the emotions call for, such as aggression or sexual activity, is socially unacceptable (Schuerger, 1979, p. 93).

Once the client has opened up with the anger, the counselor can help her understand the function of the anger and finally come to some action so as to eliminate that anger. Involvement of the family in this process may help them understand the wife's frustration, and through this understanding, they may find ways to relieve future situations that cause the angry and/or "trapped" feelings. It may well be that this phase, when including family counseling, will take many, many sessions.

The counselor would do well to spend some time in career counseling with the "trapped" housewife client, for in the words of Eason (1972)

> . . . most women have time, energy, and knowledge beyond what is needed for their essential responsibilities. They must make a choice about what to do with these and other potential personal resources (p. 128).

Schlossberg (1972) believes that

> . . . women have been limited in their decision-making possibilities because of societal limitations on their dreaming and because of the difficulties in implementing dreams that include an achievement component.
>
> Through strategies combining counseling, guidance, and social activism, counselors can be part of a liberating force that will enable women to expand their horizons and implement their dreams (p. 137).

Career counseling for the housewife should include a realistic assessment of interests, assets, and values, and this data can then be synthesized into the options available to the client - not only in reality but also in her dreams or fantasies. The counselor should encourage dreaming and exploring of dreams, for through this, the client can come to a meaningful occupational choice (Schlossberg, 1972). For some clients, it may be possible to immediately jump into the occupation or the training for it, but for the typical "trapped" housewife, the transition from home to occupation may take years. In the meantime, this transition can consist of training/schooling and/or volunteering to further explore the dream.

Whatever they are, the counseling strategies for the "trapped" housewife are likely to combine the traditional one-to-one counseling with organizing consciousness raising groups for women who need support and models to imitate and the directing of action activities as described in the next section of this paper.

COMMUNITY OPTIONS AND RESOURCES

In trying to help the "trapped" housewife find fulfillment, there are a number of different avenues that the counselor should explore. First, there is the need to give the woman some relief from responsibilities at home. The first step should be the isolating of available day-care programs or baby-sitting services, but if financial circumstances or the absence of day care programs necessitate, the formation of a baby-sitting cooperative is a highly desirable alternative. The cooperative consists of mothers who exchange baby-sitting Monday through Friday during the day and who pay each other tickets instead of money. Each person entering the coop receives an allotment of tickets based on the number of children they have, and these tickets are traded between members at a given rate in exchange for baby-sitting. This certainly does not allow the woman to be employed, but it does permit an escape from the home and the meeting of new people. Ideally, the husband and wife could share baby-sitting responsibility during the week, but employment patterns usually make this economically difficult and impractical.

Second, there is the need to give the woman who feels "trapped" opportunities for personal growth. Manis suggests that counselors need to involve disengaged women ". . . in activities such as goal setting, vocational exploration, and employment or educational counseling, that will 're-engage' the client to society rather than the traditional treatment of helping the client become 'adjusted' to her role (p. 190)." Going further, Katz and Knapp (1974) state that

> The evolving housewife wants help in sorting her options, in ordering her priorities and setting goals. She wants guidance in attaining those goals, support in bolstering her self-confidence, and above all else, advice on how to successfully <u>combine</u> family and career of school (p. 106).

(For the counselor who wishes to read more about balancing home and career, Otto and Otto (1976) offer an appealing commentary.)

Personal growth, then, can come within the counseling setting, through various activities, but it can also occur through volunteering. This volunteering may be an excellent means of easing re-entry (Weissman, et al, p. 571), or it can be the break from home and the fulfillment needed. Our society provides numerous voluntary positions which can take as little as an hour a month to as much as forty or more hours per week. Many women find volunteering extremely satisfying, for as Feeney (1976) puts it,

> Volunteering is a tangible expression of a citizen's responsibility to the community and a commitment to improving the quality of life in a democratic society (p. 110).

Volunteering not only gives satisfaction, but it can generally be done on a flexible schedule which allows time for home responsibilities, too. It must be mentioned, however, that volunteering is not without its psychological problems.

> . . .stereotypes persist in the mind of the public as well as in many women's perceptions of themselves when contemplating the job market. Just as she has so often said: "I'm only a housewife," a woman now adds, "I've only done volunteer work," or "I'm just a volunteer" (Feeney, p. 110).

For the woman who does not value herself in the role of volunteer, the counselor may wish to help her see volunteering as a move toward paid work and then assist in finding a volunteer's job that carries the characteristics of a job the woman would eventually like and a high probability of eventual employment. A file of local volunteer opportunities will help in this matching process.

Finally, the "trapped" housewife may need some sense of economic productivity. In the words of one former client, "For me, volunteering became a trap in which I did not have to grow; I want to be paid for what I do." The counselor should be able to help in the process of locating a job that fits the woman's qualifications as well as her time schedule. This task may not be easy if there are school-aged children whom she wants to greet as they come home from school. There is a great reluctance to hire part-time employees in some businesses, and if the woman is professionally trained, employers may not believe that there can be a serious, part-time commitment to a profession. Finding opportunities for economic productivity may be the greatest challenge for the counselor working with the "trapped" housewife.

CONCLUSION

The "trapped" housewife is likely to be seen in a number of settings, and it is crucial that counselors be aware of their unique plight and strategies to help them resolve it. Simply stated, all women are not going to find fulfillment in the roles of wife, mother and homemaker. This traditional and stereotypical view of women must be discarded in the face of a world that is opening its doors to women. It is the task of the counselor to help these women in their search for meaning both in the home and outside of it, and it is highly likely that the counseling process may need to involve the husband, for he may be part of the trapping network. The community mental health counselor, the counselor educator, the college counselor, and the career planning counselor, each needs to help married female clients find sources of relief from home responsibilities, personal and professional growth, companionship, and economic productivity. Not all women may want this, but the counselor should beware of the perspective that rejection of the traditional homemaker role is a sign of maladjustment or that no women would want to escape the domestic role.

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